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ABSTRACT

A business and professional communication course at Gallaudet University promotes interaction between the community and the deaf or hard of hearing students at the university, and provides needed professional development services to these students. The course is divided into four main parts: (1) theories of organizational communication; (2) business writing; (3) interpersonal strategies on the job; and (4) staff meeting presentations. Throughout the course, students interact with employers to acquire information, and to practice specific skills. To assess formal and informal communication, culture, and climate in an organization, students visit an organization, using it as a lab to observe theories and concepts in process. The second community exchange incorporates business writing by having students arrange and attend business appointments with real employers, such as the Smithsonian, Amtrak, the United States Senate, Greenpeace, and the Internal Revenue Service. Students must provide all the necessary business writing, such as memos, confirmation letters, thank you notes, and briefing reports. In regard to the third course component, interpersonal strategies on the job are discussed throughout the semester, with a special day occurring in class when a panel of deaf professionals discuss their experiences and coping strategies in a hearing work world. Finally, at the end of the course, each student gives a presentation to professionals from the community on time/stress management, communication technology, day care, and other work-related issues. (PRA)

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"A COMMUNITY EXCHANGE: TEACHING THE BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE"

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All communication presumes an exchange of ideas. In a business and professional communication course, the world outside academia can come to life for students when there is an actual exchange of information with people in the community. King Jordan, the first deaf president of Gallaudet University, said in his October, 1988 Inaugural Address, that we at Gallaudet must "...never be satisfied with what we know, always be alert to new possibilities, and always be curious."

From its inception, the Business and Professional Communication course demonstrated a collaboration between community and university to explore new possibilities. The course began in 1986 as a result of special funding from Chevron to provide needed professional development services to students. President Jordan's inaugural remarks seem to be a fitting description for the way in which we had already been approaching the design and evolution of the Business and Professional Communication course for several semesters.

The demand for "relevance" in the classroom has long been on the minds of students and employers. Students want to be prepared to meet the challenges of the work world, and employers want

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competent workers who can be effective in a variety of situations. Acknowledging the importance and potential benefits of a culturally diverse work force is fast becoming a major focus among employers today. The 1973 Sections 501, 503 and 504 of the National Rehabilitation Act gave impetus to hiring disabled people. In 1990, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act more broadly affirmed the rights of disabled people to communication access, to jobs, and to public accommodations and services.

As new attitudes in the workplace open up more professional opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing individuals, there is greater interest in interacting with the special population at Gallaudet. The Business and Professional Communication course promotes such interaction. The result is that both employers and students learn and grow.

In order to combine theoretical principles of organizational communication with practical experience, the course involves the Department of Communication Arts and the Office of Experiential Programs Off Campus (EPOC), Gallaudet's coop internship program. The co-authors of the paper represent the two units. The EPOC program provides pre-professional work experiences related to the major or career goals for undergraduates. Last year, EPOC placed 354 deaf and hard of hearing students in paid and unpaid work experiences with 252 employers locally, nationally, and internationally. Their contacts and experiences with employers provide invaluable resources and information for the class.

The course is divided into four main parts: 1. theories of organizational communication; 2. business writing; 3. interpersonal strategies on the job, and 4. staff meeting presentations. Throughout the course, students interact with employers to acquire information, and to practice specific skills.

To assess formal and informal communication, culture, and climate in an organization, students actually visit an organization, using it as a "lab" to observe theories and concepts in practice. Often, the impressions, feelings, and assumptions that students become aware of during the trip are powerful learning tools, and help them to incorporate theoretical information into their own goals and values. For example, seeing the Executive Suite, and comparing it to the offices of the lower level staff, often promotes energetic discussion about climate, culture, and nonverbal messages. Worksites have varied from accounting firms such as Arthur Andersen and Co., and Peat Marwick Main, to a hotel chain like Ramada International, to the headquarters of the United Way of America. Although time permits only an hour tour to observe the organization, it provides fertile material for follow-up discussion. On some occasions, the class has met a Gallaudet student intern or graduate at the site, and students realize that they could be doing something similar in the future.

The second community exchange incorporates business writing. Instead of inventing imaginary employers and situations to practice writing skills, students arrange and attend business appointments with real employers, and provide all the necessary business writing

related to it, including:

-a memo to EPOC, informing them of the upcoming visit and requesting sign language interpreters when necessary;

-a confirmation letter to the employer, as a follow-up and check of the phone arrangements

-a thank you letter to the employer, after the meeting with th employer;

-a briefing report to inform the class about the discussion with the employer student writ a two page report for the company files and use "notes" in a two minute presentation.

EPOC recruits both deaf and hearing employers to help with this activity, and it becomes an educational experience for them, too. Employers have included the Smithsonian, Amtrak, the U.S. Senate, Greenpeace, and government agencies such as Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). However, students end up experiencing contact with a variety of professionals in this one activity: the employer who actually sits down with them, that individual's secretary, the staff in the lobby, an interpreter, and transportation people.

The activity provides students with a selection of four topics they can choose to discuss in their meetings or information-gathering interviews. A topic might be, "What does it mean to be a professional?" or "Are communication skills at work as important as actual job knowledge and training?" This adds an additional educational component to the writing skills activity. Students are often surprised at the complexities of scheduling appointments,

arranging transportation, holding meetings, and the need to provide clear written communication.

Interpersonal strategies on the job are discussed during the whole semester. A special day occurs in class each semester when a panel of three or four deaf professionals discuss their experiences and coping strategies in a hearing work world. Participants have represented a variety of work situations such as a publishing company, a computer software business, a messenger service, IBM, government work, a visitors' center, and a deaf advocacy group. For the deaf professionals, it is an opportunity to help the students know what to expect in the "real world" (students find it hard to believe that they have it "easy" at Gallaudet), and it gives the students new role models (and ideas about possible job situations).

At the end of the course, during three class meetings, each student gives a presentation on a work-related topic to a "staff meeting". The 12 evaluators or "staff members" (four at each class meeting) include professionals from the community representing various kinds of organizations; for example, the Washington Post, the YMCA, the Federal Highway Administration, and Chevron. Again the EPOC contacts are invaluable here. The evaluators represent different ethnic groups, and we strive for an equal balance between deaf and hearing, and male and female.

A particular place of employment is chosen for each class (staff) meeting; it might be an insurance company, a department store, or non-profit agency. Several (five or six) members of the

class present talks (5-6 min.) on a matter of concern to the staff of the particular organization. Topics concern work-related issues in the 90's such as substance abuse, fitness/wellness programs, time/stress management, elder care, communication technology, recycling on the job, and day care. A short question period follows each presentation.

Presenters are expected to use standard organizational principles, visual aids, and handouts as they inform and persuade. Some choose to talk and sign for themselves; others sign and ask an interpreter to voice for them - just as they might in a "real job situation," depending on their individual skills. Videotaping the session allows the students to view their presentations later and to review the comments of the evaluators at the staff meeting. There is a "group" evaluation at the end of each session, and students receive written copies of each evaluator's "judging sheet" later. Students pick their own topics and presentation days. The class members who are not "presenting" on a particular day are in attendance (in the back of the room) to observe their fellow classmates perform on their mock staff meeting day.

Although this presentation exercise may cause the most anxiety of all the class assignments, the final recommendation of the students has consistently been to do it TWICE during the semester. Through practice and employer feedback, students realize not only the complexities and challenges involved with presenting information professionally, they leave with clear feedback about strengths and weaknesses, and ideas about how to improve. This

realistic and practical information leaves students with a powerful energy to continue practicing, analyzing and learning long after the class has ended.

For the past four semesters, the class has had an enrollment limit of 17 and has been "full" each time. The number of community people in professional occupations is 23 and can go as high as 40 if one includes the support staff for the "operation" of this class (i.e. secretaries, interpreters, camera operators, and administrative assistants). If a person wanted to initiate a course like this at another college, we would strongly recommend cooperation between an academic department and a cooperative education internship office as we have described here.

This Business and Professional Communication course offers unique opportunities to Gallaudet students to: 1. visit a work site to observe the culture, climate, and organizational arrangement; 2. participate in an individual meeting with a professional off-campus; 3. interact with a panel of professionals who work in the community; 4. present a report in front of a staff meeting of actual employers.

The participating professionals from the community have been enthusiastic and most generous with their time. Their comments have been very helpful to the classes, and the students have taken the "outside" evaluations very seriously. The "work world" in the Washington area is exceedingly positive about adapting to the rights and needs of employees with disabilities. The Business and Professional Communication course has taken up President Jordan's

challenge in his Inaugural Address that Gallaudet "...must become a working model--a community in which people of all kinds...live, learn, and work together."

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